# *New York*
# Theatre Critics' Reviews
## *1946*

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*Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers*

NEW YORK SUN — NEW YORK TIMES — NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM — NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK POST — NEW YORK DAILY NEWS — NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE — NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

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# "If the Shoe Fits"

Journal American

DECEMBER 6, 1946

## 'If Shoe Fits,' Opens At Century Theatre

By ROBERT GARLAND

Once upon a time, to the City of New York on the Island of Manhattan, came a handsome young adventurer by the name of Leonard Sillman. He had charm. He had perseverance. And in his heart was a real affection for the theatre. With his charm, he made people believe in him. With his perseverance, he made people take stock in him. And with his real affection for the theatre, he forwarded the careers of such potential stage celebrities as Imogene Coca, John Lund, Libby Holman, Henry Fonda and Eve Arden.

By so doing, he lent a helping hand to the production of "Low and Behold" and "Fools Rush In," of which, dear children, you may have heard, and to endless editions of "New Faces," which certainly must have come to your attention. Each of these adventures of our handsome young arrival possessed a portion of his charm, his persistence and his real affection for the theatre. And playgoers, who're patient people in the City of New York on the Island of Manhattan, kept holding off—and hoping!

• • •

### Big Idea

And so, sweet youngsters, it came to pass that our adventurous young producer, with still another chance bestowed upon him, arrived at his latest Big Idea. It's a Big Idea which has been hanging 'round for many a Broadway season, waiting for recognition. The Cinderella story, when revamped and set to songs and dances, has never failed—now has it? So why not go back to the original in which Girl gets slipper, Girl loses slipper and Girl gets slipper back again? And, along with slipper, Boy!

This, our handsome young adventurer by the name of Leonard Sillman, has done. With his persistence in the one hand and his love for the theatre in the other, he has done it. What he has not done is remain true to his first fine fairy-tale convictions. In "If the Shoe Fits," which, last night, had its first Manhattan showing up near Central Park and in the Century Theatre, the Cinderella Story has been steamed up, boiled down and steeped in so-called sophistication until its originator wouldn't know it.

• • •

### Good Try

Now listen, my children, and you shall hear of the Leila Ernst who's fresh and lovely and delightfully out of the old-new fairy story picture as its new-old Cinderella. She's got everything it takes to make a musical-comedy princess. Everything except material. And Florence Desmond the Fairy Godmother who longs to return to the bottom of her garden, could use some good stuff, too. In Leonard Sillman's one-more-chance production, she's best when acting like Tallulah Bankhead. That's uncanny!

The rest, nice lads and lassies, is neither clean enough for you nor unclean enough for me. In its betwixt and between version attributed to June Carroll and Robert Duke, the Cinderella Story isn't one thing or the other. And the lyrics by Miss Carroll and the music by David Raksin, the costumes by Kathryn Kuhn and the choreography by Charles Weidman, are remarkably routine. So is every other little thing up at the Century, with the not-too-exceptional vaudeville dancing of Barbara Perry and Jack Williams.

So, Leonard Sillman has had that final chance and muffed it.

**'IF THE SHOE FITS.'**

Musical comedy, with book by June Carroll and Robert Duke; music by David Raskin; lyrics by June Carroll; book direction by Eugene Bryden; settings by Edward Gilbert; costumes by Kathryn Kuhn; choreography by Charles Weidman; musical director, Will Irwin; orchestrations by Russell Bennett; vocal director, Joe Moon; presented by Leonard Sillman at the Century Theater Thursday evening, December —, 1946. The cast:

Town Crier ..... Robert Penn
Singing Attendant ..... Eugene Martin
Dancing Attendant ..... Billy Vaun
Broderick ..... Jack Williams
Acrobatic Attedants: Jane Vinson and Paula Dee
Cinderella ..... Leila Ernst
Mistress Spratt ..... Jody Gilbert
Delilah } her daughters } Marilyn Day
Thais } her daughters } Sherele North
The Butcher Boy ..... Richard Wentworth
First Undertaker ..... Don Mayo
Second Undertaker ..... Walter Kaitwinkel
Lorell ..... Gail Adams
Lilith ..... Eileen Ayers
First Lawyer ..... Harvey Braun
Second Lawyer ..... Stanley Simmonds
Lady Eve ..... Florence Desmond
Herman ..... Joe Besser
Four Sprites ..... Vincent Carbone, Harry Rogers, Allen Knowles, Fred Bernaski
1st Troubadour ..... William Ratus
2d Troubadour ..... Ray Morrissey
3d Troubadour ..... Richard Wentworth
Their Arranger ..... Fin Olsen
Major Domo ..... Youka Troubetskoy
Lady Guinevere ..... Eleanor Jones
Lady Perservera ..... Joyce White
Dame Crackle ..... Chloe Owen
The Baker ..... Ray Cook
Dame Crumple ..... Joyce White
Dame Crinkle ..... Jean Olds
Prince Charming ..... Edward Dew
Widow Willow ..... Adrianne
Kate ..... Barbara Perry
King Kindly ..... Edward Lambert
His Magnificence, The Wizard ..... Frank Milton
Court Dancer ..... Vincent Carbone
Sailor ..... Richard d'Arcy
His Sweethearts } Marcia Mabe, Marybly Harwood

SYNOPSIS: The story takes place during the Middle ages in one of those mythical kingdoms known only to writers of musical comedies. In this case, "The Kingdom of Nicely." Act I, Scene 1—Town Gate. Scene 2—Cinderella's Kitchen. Scene 3—Palace Gate. Scene 4—Ballroom. Scene 5—Ante-room of Palace. Scene 6—Ballroom. Act II, Scene 1—Town Gate. Scene 2—Cinderella's Kitchen. Scene 3—Palace Gate. Scene 4—Village Street. Scene 5—Palace Gate. Scene 6—Ante-Room. Scene 7—Village Street.

New York Post

DECEMBER 6, 1946

## Musical Comedy Cinderella Has Melancholy Career

By Richard Watts Jr.

Compared to such notorious horrors of a season ago as "The Girl From Nantucket" and "The Duchess Misbehaves," the new musical comedy called "If the Shoe Fits" may not really be as terrible as it seemed last night. Perhaps, too, one shouldn't expect too much of a girl-and-music concoction which coyly proclaims that its action takes place in a land known as the Kingdom of Nicely. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the indefatigable Leonard Sillman's latest production is the dullest and most inept retelling of the Cinderella story that has taken place within the memory of man or critic.

It seems rather a shame, for the authors did have a few passable ideas in mind. Not, heaven knows, that conception of the Kingdom of Nicely, which must be the most boring mythical country since the romantic novelists started inventing such things. There was, however, something to be said for the plan of showing the wicked step-sisters as pretty tired of going about sticking their feet in glass slippers too small for them, or the possibility that the Good Fairy might grow weary of always getting the Prince for Cinderella and decide to capture him herself for a change. But not, apparently, a great deal.

**Feeble Jests**

Anyway, the authors also decided that they should be "sophisticated" in what they innocently regarded as their satirical treatment of the legend. Being sophisticated meant for them that they should get in a lot of jokes about sex and the lack of chastity of the ladies in court and the tremendous excitement caused by the discovery that Cinderella was really an innocent girl. The resulting jests are feeble almost to the point of making one feel sorry for their hopeful perpetrators.

Perhaps you would rather have me tell you about the music, which sometimes is looked upon as fairly important in this type of show. I can do so very quickly. Both in music and lyrics "If the Shoe Fits" is exceptionally uninteresting. The costumes? Elaborate but not very attractive and, in the case of those provided for some of the men, downright hideous. The sets? Quite pleasant; in fact, rather ingenious.

**Minimum of Merit**

With book and music possessing a minimum of merit, it is perhaps unnecessary to add that the production, which sets out to be gay, imaginative and satirical, is completely without style. Even if the narrative had possessed something of interest, it would have had difficulty in contending against the formlessness of the presentation.

Turning to the performers, there should be both praise and sympathy for Florence Desmond, of the London music halls, who plays the Good Fairy. It is a hopeless role, but when Miss Desmond can forget all about it and go in for her hearty sort of personal humor, she is a comfort to us all. In fact, her impersonation of Tallulah Bankhead was such a delight that, for a few minutes, it made one forget the general ineptitude of the show.

Among those who deserve sympathy are Leila Ernst, who is a pretty but hardly exciting Cinderella, and Jack Williams, who plays Prince Charming's friend agreeably. Edward Dew, who made something of an impression last year in "The Red Mill," is lost as the Prince. The roles of the wicked sisters have been cut down to almost nothing, which may be a pity, since Marilyn Day, as the taller of them, suggested that, properly restrained, she might be an agreeable soubrette.

The New York Times

DECEMBER 6, 1946

## *With Music, Too*

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Speak respectfully of the gallant backers of a musical show entitled "If the Shoe Fits" that was exposed at the Century last evening. Sitting in the presence of their own money, they tossed off a dry whimsey gaily as though it were stimulating them. But it must have been obvious that this Sillman shoe does not fit a Broadway show-shop where it is customary to put talent on display. A precocious vulgarization of the Cinderella legend, it sedulously diverts the little talent it has to minor places.

* * *

The talent consists of Joe Besser, a happy mountebank, wide of girth, who can wring a laugh out of a waddle across the stage; Jack Williams, a winning and expert tap dancer who can also sing; Barbara Perry, who tap-dances, sings and clowns attractively, and Eleanor Jones, who has a trained singing voice. When "If the Shoe Fits" becomes so barren that even the producer notices it, these performers of genuine talent have a chance to do their stuff.

But "If the Shoe Fits" is an instance of producing a musical play with everything at random and none of the real talent in the places where it is needed most. As far as one could perceive, the book is bankrupt in ideas, achieving only the perverse miracle of being vulgar without being funny. The score consists of one of the most continuous unpleasant sounds of our times, as if the music had been incorrectly transcribed by an organized gang of vicious imps.

* * *

Leila Ernest, an enchanting young lady with a sweet though soft singing voice, impersonates Cinderella plausibly, despite a book that gets quickly destroyed by its own sense of humor. Edward Dew, who plays Prince Charming, has an excellent baritone voice, and one song, entitled "I Wish," to use it upon.

As the good fairy, Florence Desmond has the leading part to play, and she obliges with conspicuous abandon. Apropos of nothing rational, she contributes three expert screen impersonations. Everything else she does also looks like a series of low-comedy interpolations. Probably they are good enough for a musical show in the stream of unconsciousness school.

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 6, 1946

# 'If the Shoe Fits' a Lush Setting for Cinderella

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Toward the end of the first act of "If the Shoe Fits," the star, Florence Desmond, gets a clear stage for her justly famed imitations. They have little to do with the rest of the show, but they constitute the brightest of the few moments of sharp theater in the evening.

This flavorless Mother Goose-burger was a charming original idea. The purpose was to present a sophisticated, lush version of the Cinderella yarn. Despite some definite assets, it seems to linger for days in a witless and tasteless progression.

It is difficult to condemn a production on which so much time and money were obviously lavished. But the truth is that most of the labor was misguided.

Against a background of castle turrets and flying pennants, the story is told in a delightful setting which swings from scene to scene like the pages of a story book.

The costumes are riotously brilliant, there are several pleasant voices, and the dances are fine and gay.

The songs are undistinguished, and the book has a way of driving off your concentration until you are frequently uncertain of what has just happened.

The story takes place in a fabulous kingdom, and follows the original, with embellishments. The little scullery maid sister is left by her elders, wishes for beauty and is taken to the ball by her fairy Godmother. The Prince falls in love with her, and is left with her slipper, which during the second act he attempts to fit on all the ladies of the kingdom.

The chief variation is the character of the Godmother. Here she becomes a sporting matchmaker who gets her first taste of mortal love as Cinderella's rival for the Prince.

It is this role which is alotted to Miss Desmond. Aside from the aforesaid imitations, and a song called "I Want to Go Back to the Bottom of the Garden," there is not much magic in it for her.

She fights the rather labored material, tossing it to the audience in frank music hall style. Unfortunately there is so little there to promote that her efforts end up in a mugfest.

This is all sad to report because Miss Desmond obviously knows how to put over a song, and when she chooses can move around the stage as gracefully as any ballerina.

Leila Ernst is an exquisite Cinderella, and Edward Dew makes a handsome Prince with an excellent voice.

Barbara Perry and Jack Williams are decided standouts for their restful tap dances.

Joe Besser tries hard to milk some comedy from his role as a mouse turned man but his material is mostly small time night club stuff.

Eddie Lambert is given a minimum to do as the King, and it is not until the very end that Adrienne gets a chance to use her mellow voice.

Kathryn Kuhn makes the show a riot of color with her kaleidoscope of costumes, and Charles Weidman fills the stage with lively design when he takes over as dance director.

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 6, 1946

# 'If the Shoe Fits' Offers Novel Settings and Dreary Goings-On

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There is some very nice scenery at the New Century Theatre. There also is some very nice scenery in Central Park, nearby. Since the park is free and they are asking for money at the Century, it is reasonable to expect something in addition to the view.

This something in addition is a musical comedy titled "If the Shoe Fits." I was there last night and I wished I were in the park, where the risk of mugging is not so great. Leonard Sillman's production is a witless and offensive affair which has the effrontery to dirty up the fairy story about Cinderella.

Among the muggers committing their little misdemeanors are Florence Desmond, a low comedienne resembling a poor man's Beatrice Lillie, who plays the Fairy Godmother; Joe Besser, a fat man, who plays the mouse who becomes the coachman; Jody Gilbert, a plump woman, who plays Mistress Spratt, and assorted dancers who show their teeth.

Among the more legitimate participants are Leila Ernst, a nice-looking girl with a sweet smile and no chance of getting into the Met, as Cinderella; Edward Dew, a leading man with teeth, as Prince Charming, and Barbara Perry and Jack Williams, an able pair of tap dancers.

Pop-Up Scenery.

The scheme of presenting "If the Shoe Fits" is admirable. The fairy-tale backgrounds turn like the pages of a child's pop-up book, with the various scenes popping up as the pages swing. These settings are by Edward Gilbert, and besides being mechanically ingenious, they are delightfully decorative.

I won't go into the book by June Carroll and Robert Duke, and they shouldn't have, either. David Raskin's songs try desperately to be modern but seem only endless, and Miss Carroll, the lyric writer, must have hacked up a big dictionary to find enough rhymes for them. I must say, though, that Charles Weidman has done a clean, expert job in staging the dances, and one of them, in which the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Nicely are dead on their feet from having attended too many of Prince Charming's parties, is very amusing.

Mr. Sillman, an incurable amateur of the stage, should be spanked, made to wash his mouth with soap, put to bed and cautioned not to go near the professional theatre again.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

DECEMBER 6, 1946

= By HOWARD BARNES =

***Full of Broken Glass***

THERE is an excellent impersonation of Tallulah Bankhead by Florence Desmond in "If the Shoe Fits." It is a bright moment in a lamentable musical show. Most of the didoes in the new Leonard Sillman production at the Century are concerned with a tongue in cheek version of the Cinderella legend. Rarely has the much-abused fairy tale taken such a beating. There are rather ingenious pop-up sets in the center of the stage, but they frame a tedious and tasteless hodge-podge of book, music and lyrics. Since the performers are scarcely enchanting enough to dispense entirely with beguiling material, they have nothing but their exits to save them. After a dozen or more scenes, exits have a definite appeal on both sides of the footlights.

June Carroll and Robert Duke, who admit to the libretto, have thought it a dandy notion to surround Cinderella and Prince Charming with a godmother known as Lady Eve, a man-mouse called Herman, a diminutive King Kindly, various dames, sprites and undertakers and a couple of acrobatic attendants. The acrobats are all right, even though their backflips are somewhat extraneous to the proceedings. There is also a nimble tap-dancing team, Jack Williams and Barbara Perry. The principals, having to pay attention to the wisps of plot, struggle through colloquial gags in medieval costumes. Even when they are given massive shots of innuendo, the lines have the crispness of a wet wash. The lyrics match them for witless wordage.

• • •

Musical comedy books being frequently unimaginative, "If the Shoe Fits" might still have been tolerable had the songs interrupted the action felicitously. The truth is that David Raksin's score is so dull that it almost defies humming. There are no great voices to be exploited in the piece, although Leila Ernst and Edward Dew sing well enough as Cinderella and Prince Charming. Aside from "The End of the Story," the tunes are about as melodic as a five-fingered exercise. Various members of the cast merely talk through the numbers, which is probably as good a way as any to execute them. At least they have a beat, which permits the dancers, under the supervision of Charles Weidman and Don Liberto, to cut loose on occasion.

• • •

Miss Ernst and Miss Desmond do most of the straight acting in the unfortunate fantasy. Their hard work is not often rewarded by much to take one's attention off the acrobats. Joe Besser, as Herman, the coachman, takes over in a long and dreary camping routine, waving his hand and scampering around effeminately. Eddie Lambert, Adrienne, Jody Gilbert and Frank Milton are some of those trapped in the glass-slipper episodes. They constitute what looks for all the world like a musical comedy, but "If the Shoe Fits" lacks all the essential ingredients of the form.

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PM

DECEMBER 8, 1946

—Kronenberger

# *'Cinderella' With Music But Very Little Else*

***PM Reviews***

Possibly on the theory that most musicals only end up re-telling the Cinderella story anyhow, *If the Shoe Fits* has gone straight back to Cinderella herself. This maneuver saved the librettists time, since they didn't have to think about the plot; and it saves me time, since I won't have to tell about it. But a lot of time has been wasted for all that. The show at the Century is decidedly dull, and as lacking in taste as in liveliness.

The librettists have not, to be sure, made the mistake of telling the simple old nursery tale straight. They have made the far worse mistake (in view of their talents) of spoofing it. This has meant scrambling it a bit as well, such as having Cinderella's fairy godmother elect to compete with Cinderella for Prince Charming. This is but one of many little wrinkles that get more sex into the story, or at any rate reference to it. Unfortunately, most of the references are cheap and none are witty; nor is more than a moment or two of the spoofing any wittier. The dialogue, for the most part, consists of things like "I'll be with you in a minute or three."

• • •

The music, for the most part, consists of things that, far from being able to hum, I'd never in a million years be able to recognize. A couple of the songs are pleasant enough, and some of the costumes are pretty enough—but for all its medieval and fairy-story opportunities, the show has been mounted and costumed without imagination or style. The best things in it are a few of the performers. Leila Ernst, the Cinderella of the piece, is charming to look at; Edward Dew, the Prince Charming, has a nice voice; and Barbara Perry and Jack Williams dance agreeably. Florence Desmond, who is starred as the fairy godmother, has a good deal of personality; but it is a music-hall personality, which finds here neither the right material nor the proper role. Miss Desmond does, however, give *If the Shoe Fits* its one high moment with a wonderful impersonation of Tallulah Bankhead. But that's the only time the shoe really fits in the course of a very long evening.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER.

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The Sun

DECEMBER 6, 1946

## 'If the Shoe Fits' a Dull Musical Play, With Routine Score, Dreary Book.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

One of those mythical kingdoms turns up again in "If the Shoe Fits," the first song and dance show to come along since "Park Avenue," and the results are pretty sad. The new production, given road testing in Detroit, was presented last night at the Century by Leonard Sillman.

"If the Shoe Fits" puts the Cinderella legend to music, and to music that is only fair. There is some nice dancing scattered through the production, but the book is dreary and witless and it became quite apparent during the evening that the Kingdom of Nicely is a far duller place than Ruritania or Graustark ever could have been.

The high spot of the production's first half—and of the entire show, for that matter—was provided by Florence Desmond, from out of the London theater, with an extraordinarily recognizable impersonation of Tallulah Bankhead. Miss Desmond is energetic and for all of her brassy music hall manner, she does little with lifeless material. But she stops the show with her imitation of the husky-voiced pride of Jasper, Ala. For half a minute last night I was almost convinced that Tallulah had fled from the touring "Eagle Rampant" and had suddenly found her way to the Century stage. And that would have been all right, too.

Jack Williams, a lanky fellow with magic in his feet—remember him from "Let's Face It?"—comes to the rescue of a hopelessly floundering book with his tap dancing, and Barbara Perry is also quite good in that department. Leila Ernst hasn't a strong voice, but she is an appealing Cinderella, and certainly a very pretty one.

Edward Dew, who was quite an engaging fellow with his "Every Day Is Ladies Day With Me" song in the "Red Mill" revival, does what he can with the Prince Charming role in "If the Shoe Fits," and the droll, barrel-shaped Joe Besser, in his sputtering and explosive fashion, tries desperately to be funny—and there are times when he almost is.

The best songs in the David Raskin score are "In the Morning" and "This Is the End of the Story." But Miss Desmond does fairly well with the number, "I Want to Go Back to the Bottom of the Garden" in the second half. The humor in the Century's new show is painful; the costumes and backgrounds are unexciting.

"If the Shoe Fits" never comes to life. It represents a considerable waste of time, some talent and a lot of money from incautious investors.

# "Years Ago"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

DECEMBER 4, 1946

= By HOWARD BARNES =

***Fascinating Yankees***

RUTH GORDON'S reminiscences in "Years Ago" are rueful as well as comic. In the able hands of Fredric March, Florence Eldridge and Patricia Kirkland, her biographical fragment at the Mansfield is a generally enchanting period piece. There is a rich fund of amusement in the production, particularly when March is exploding as an irascible factory foreman who likes to remember his early sea-faring days. There is a detailed documentation of family life in Massachusetts a generation ago, given remarkable persuasion and emphasis by Garson Kanin's expert direction. If the central portrait of an aspirant actress is willful and somewhat static, that is the fault of the author, in more ways than one.

* * *

The character of the father dominates "Years Ago" so completely that the main theme becomes a bit blurred and repetitive. With a shaggy mustache and a Yankee accent March builds it unerringly until Clinton Jones is a figure of stature, curious subtlety and sympathy. In merely recounting his awful youth as an orphan until he shipped as a cabin boy at eight, he suggests a drama that would have more amply deserved the pains which have been lavished on this Max Gordon production. His sudden acceptance of his daughter's desire to act rather than be a physical education instructor constitutes the heart of "Years Ago" The stubborn ambition of Ruth Gordon Jones to go on the stage is described honestly enough, but it lacks warmth and a depth of personality.

* * *

Miss Kirkland in no way fails her assignment. She is close to perfect as the sixteen-year-old stage-struck youngster, who plots a career secretly, is rebuffed in her first try for a job and goes waltzing off to New York from Wollaston in the climax. Her confidences with her considerably bedevilled mother and school friends are charming, and her casual dismissal of a lovelorn Harvard boy is as cruel as it was undoubtedly supposed to be. Meanwhile she recites from Shakespeare and puts on a scene of her own to convince her old man of her talents. Miss Kirkland is very believable in "Years Ago." Ruth Gordon Jones remains a far-from-captivating girl, dulling the comic and human impact of the scenes and making their resolution a matter of less import than it might have proved.

* * *

Aiding and abetting March at every turn in giving color and meaning to the show is Florence Eldridge. As the astonishingly patient Mrs. Jones, who puts up with a choleric husband and a completely self-centered daughter, puts her little hoard of silver under her bed at night, wangles a telephone, and cherishes a lazy tomcat, she adds immeasurably to the delight of this bit of domestic Americana. Her scene with March, when he confesses that he once lavished a fancy valentine on a French boarding-house keeper, is utterly beguiling. Bethel Leslie and Jennifer Bunker are attractive as Ruth's chums and Richard Simon plays a properly bashful suitor, while there is a snatch of caricature by Judith Cargill as the physical education expert. Donald Oenslager's setting and the John Boyt costumes are nicely appropriate to the doings. "Years Ago" is a rewarding piece of theater, but chiefly for its atmosphere and subsidiary characters.

**'YEARS AGO.'**

Play by Ruth Gordon; directed by Garson Kanin; setting by Donald Oenslager; costumes by John Boyt; presented by Max Gordon at the Mansfield Theater Tuesday evening, December 3, 1946. The cast:

| | |
|---|---|
| Clinton Jones | Fredric March |
| Annie Jones | Florence Eldridge |
| Ruth Gordon Jones | Patricia Kirkland |
| Katherine Follett | Bethel Leslie |
| Anna Witham | Jennifer Bunker |
| Fred Whitmarsh | Richard Simon |
| Mr. Sparrow | Seth Arnold |
| Mr. Bagley | Frederic Persson |
| Miss Glavin | Judith Cargill |
| Punk | a cat |

SYNOPSIS: The dining room-sitting room at 14 Elmwood Avenue, Wollaston, Massachusetts. Act I. An evening in January—years ago. Act II. Scene 1: The following evening. Scene 2: The next afternoon. Act III. Five months later, June. About eleven o'clock in the morning.

The New York Times

DECEMBER 4, 1946

# THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Turning back the pages in her memory book, Ruth Gordon has written a pleasant, sentimental comedy, "Years Ago," which was beautifully acted at the Mansfield last evening. Among the most conspicuous characters in it you will find one named Ruth Gordon Jones. For Miss Gordon, née Jones, offers "Years Ago" as part of her autobiography without deception and no holds barred. Just to keep everything in the family, Garson Kanin, Miss Gordon's husband, has directed the performance.

Probably the most original thing about this stage autobiography is the fact that the principal character is not the author but her father. Clinton Jones, one-time second mate in deep-water vessels, and now employe of a factory in Weymouth, somehow manages to epitomize the dreariness, plain ideas and feeling of frustration that seeped into most middle-class homes in the period Miss Gordon is recalling

And since Fredric March is playing the part, Miss Gordon's father will now have to be added to the gallery of stage worthies to be remembered and respected. For Mr. March, acting in very high fettle indeed, has created a vigorous, colorful character out of many simple details. Mr. Jones blusters—probably in self-defense, Mr. Jones wears a scraggly, drooping mustache, sucks his teeth and walks with an unsteady strut. Confronted with all the petty vexations of an impoverished home, that is inhabited by a volatile, ambitious daughter, Mr. Jones is generally sunk in a morose temper, wondering what life is going to do to him next. In Mr. March's playing, Mr. Jones is a marvelously entertaining person. For this is character-acting of great distinction by a master of the craft who has not lost his respect for unrenowned people.

Since "Years Ago" is autobiography every detail is naturally accurate and all the proportions are true to life. But it is remarkable how easily the details of Miss Gordon's high-school life fall into the pattern of popular comedy. Basically, this is the story of a Wollaston, Mass., girl who confused her parents by deciding to go on the stage. Although everything in her inheritance and environment is against her, she manages in the last scene to get her trunk out of the house and start for New York and Broadway with her father's rather mystified approval.

* * *

Like many period pieces, "Years Ago" is stuffed with familiar details sentimentally recollected. To establish the period, which must be about 1913 or 1914, Miss Gordon overburdens the first act with exact reproductions of the late past—McClure's Magazine, The Saturday Evening Post with the old italic masthead, "To You, Beautiful Lady," middle blouses and many excited references to the late John Craig and Boston's lively Castle Square Theatre, where all the children of the suburbs matriculated in the drama, on cheap season tickets, if they were lucky.

Although Miss Gordon lays particular emphasis on the penury of a salary of $37 a week for a family of three persons, her father does his trading at S. S. Pierce in Boston, very elegant grocers indeed. He might have saved money, at least in those days, by trading at Wood, Pollard's, or Cobb, Bates & Yerxa's. And if an invitation to Harvard Class Day was equivalent to a proposal of marriage, a lot of otherwise respectable Harvard men today had better go into hiding.

But this is nothing more than tedious bickering between one suburbanite Bostonian and another. For the main fact is that Miss Gordon has put together an amusing charade about life on the edge of Quincy. In assembling the scenery, Donald Oenslager has not forgotten the gas-logs, the Grand Rapids furniture, the electric lights in old gas fixtures and the tasteless bric-a-brac of the period.

* * *

In the direction Mr. Kanin has approached "Years Ago" as an exercise in popular comedy, including the comic ritual of locking the windows for the night and going upstairs. Patricia Kirkland has accepted the rather formidable assignment of playing Ruth Gordon in the sheath-gown period. Miss Kirkland is a very bright and high-spirited young lady. Her acting is buoyant and pleasant, although curtailed now and then by a tendency to stand as though she were speaking a piece.

As the patient mother, Florence Eldridge is giving a kindly performance, perhaps too much in one key. Richard Simon, another "Life With Father" graduate, plays a Harvard student with bumbling good nature. To give scope to the Jones crises, other actors drift in on various amusing errands. All this suburban footing Mr. March pulls sharply together with his portrait of Mr. Jones. Taking Miss Gordon's characterization at face value, he gives Mr. Jones the sharply etched stamp of a masterpiece.

The Sun

DECEMBER 4, 1946

## Ruth Gordon's Autobiographical 'Years Ago' a Warming and Chuckling Comedy.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Ruth Gordon spun back the clock to her girlhood last night, taking us to her home town of Wollaston, Mass., in a warming and chuckling comedy, "Years Ago," presented at the Mansfield Theater. Max Gordon sponsors the new play.

"Years Ago" is not a comedy of great substance. Its material is thinly spread, and Miss Gordon has rather a difficult time piecing together her third act. But the play has atmosphere and characters, it has been written with an understandable affection, and Garson Kanin's keen direction brings forth all its values.

Miss Gordon, in her autobiographical story, presents a homey and gentle—not so gentle when Father is thundering—family-life portrait of the Joneses in the Wollaston that used to be. She writes of the uncontrollable yearnings of 16-year-old Ruth Gordon Jones, who has seen Hazel Dawn in "The Pink Lady," and of her struggle to break away from family ties. In the first act she definitely decides to become an actress; in the second she wins her father over, and in the third she leaves for New York. That's the play.

Patricia Kirkland plays the stage-struck Ruth Gordon Jones, who came along to the big city via the New York, New Haven and Hartford and who must have spent many wearying hours in the reception rooms of the Frohmans and the Belascos and the George C. Tylers of that Broadway of not so long ago. Miss Kirkland is spirited and charming.

Fredric March makes a character—sometimes too much of a character—of Father Jones, a sailor in his youth and still given to nautical outbursts, but now living out his life as the humdrum $37.50-a-week foreman at the Mellen food plant. March is far more effective in his quieter moments than he is when he is roaring, but his scene at the new wall telephone, in which he makes his first use of that infernal contraption, is one of the delights of the evening.

Florence Eldridge is entirely in the spirit of the period and the play as the bustling, patient, peace-loving Annie Jones. There are nice performances from Bethel Leslie, Jennifer Bunker and Richard Simon. This young actor is now the ardent and baffled beau of Ruth Gordon Jones; he used to be a mere tot in the early years of "Life With Father."

The costumes of a slow-motion era in American life have been done with exactness by John Boyt, and the dining room-sitting room at 14 Elmwood avenue, rich with all its lived-in detail, represents one of the astonishing Donald Oenslager's best jobs. Hardly a week goes by these days without more new scenery from the Oenslager workshop.

"Years Ago" has warmth; it is folksy and charming. Ruth Gordon has paid her tribute to Wollaston, and to her girlhood, with an entertaining, if somewhat aimless, comedy.

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Journal American

DECEMBER 4, 1946

# 'Years Ago' Bows At the Mansfield

By ROBERT GARLAND

There're times when, as a theatre reporter, I come to the conclusion that theatre people actually do know something about the theatre. This is one of them. The theatre people I've got in mind are a playwright, a director and a producer.

The playwright is Ruth Gordon. The director is Garson Kanin. The producer is Max Gordon. And the play with which they're immediately concerned is "Years Ago," which came last night to the Mansfield.

Come Spring, come Fall, I've been seeing "Years Ago" since 'way last March. Then, I went to Philadelphia to see it under the title of "Miss Jones" and in the fine old Locust Street Theatre.

There, I found it pretty near perfection with Victor Kilian, Ellen Hall and Barbara Leeds in the leading roles. "Leave it as it is," was my advice to playwright, director and producer. "Make no change whatever in cast or comedy."

So Miss Gordon rewrote her play, Mr. Kanin altered his direction and Mr. Gordon reopened his offering in Boston. There, at the quaint old Copley Theatre, under its present title and with Fredric March, Florence Eldridge and Patricia Kirkland in leading roles, I complained about the changes. The play had not been bettered. The direction had not been improved. And the producer just had to speak to Mr. March about over-accentuation.

Then, without my permission or approval, they brought their theatre-piece to Broadway. Now, it's safe and sound on 47th st., hard by Horn and Hardart's.

* * *

### Ruth's Relentless

There it should remain for many Winter nights to come. For there, Ruth Gordon's autobiographical comedy is delightfully disarming. Having written it the way she had a mind to, with self-determined direction by Garson Kanin, self-suggested production by Max Gordon, "Years Ago" is as it should be. And with neither help nor hinderance from this reporter. All along, Ruth, Garson and Max knew what they were doing.

Writing by herself, about herself and for herself, the author-actress-autobiographer from Wollaston, in Massachusetts, names names, dates and places. She calls her father Clinton; her mother Annie; her girl-friends Katherine and Anna; her boy friend Fred; her cat Punk and herself Ruth Gordon Jones. And Jones was her real name, believe her. It was a real name she lost between Elmwood ave. and Times sq.

You meet Ruth and her family in the dining-sitting room of their not-too-happy home. It's January, the year being that of "The Pink Lady," Hazel Dawn and "The Banks of the Saskatchewan." And when, five months later, she sets out for the theatre world of which she's now so great a citizen, she leaves behind a telescopeless father, a bewildered mother, a downcast boy-friend and a contented cat who cares for heat rather than humanity.

The rest, from the role of Nips in "Peter Pan" to the author of last night's autobiographical play, you make up from memory or from any "Who's Who in the Theatre" since 1915.

* * *

### Annie's Admirable

As Ruth Gordon Jones, Jack Kirkland's daughter Patricia is young, fresh and sufficiently relentless. She, too, is going to be an actress, even if it kills you. Last Spring, down Philadelphia way, Barbara Leeds was the make-believe Gordon girl I'd have asked to stay. But playwright, director and producer ruled otherwise. So here am I, eating my words in honor of Miss Kirkland. Finding them tasty, too!

As Clinton Jones, Ruth's toughly tender father, Fredric March acts good and up to please the visiting moviegoers and good and down to keep this non-moviegoer reasonably contented. Prior to Manhattan, Victor Kilian was a bit more soft-spoken and sincere. But, even then, Miss Gordon, Mr. Kanin and Mr. Gordon knew best about the theatre. However, it's Florence Eldridge who, as Ruth's touchingly tender mother, now out-acts all others.

Surrounding the on-stage Joneses are Richard Simon, bloody but unbowed as Ruth's beau, Fred; Bethel Leslie and Jennifer Bunker, girlish and giggly as Ruth's best friends; Seth Arnold, very much as usual as the owner of a wagon; and A Cat which, as the continuously put-out Punk, is actorially second only to Florence Eldridge. Donald Oenslager's period setting is wonderfully Wollastonian. So are John Boyt's period costumes.

Yes, indeed, you-all certainly do know something about the theatre, you Playwright Ruth Gordon, you Director Garson Kanin, you Producer Max Gordon. Yourr is the right way for "Years Ago" to be. Apologies, my friends, and congratulations!

PM Exclusive

DECEMBER 5, 1946

*Kronenberger*

# *Ruth Gordon's Likeable Comedy About Her Youth*

*PM Reviews*

Ruth Gordon has written a likeable little comedy about the days when she was 16-year-old Ruth Gordon Jones and wanted desperately to go on the stage. The mood is not satiric but sentimental, and the source material is largely the memory book and the family album. Miss Gordon is nostalgically dreaming back to the time when she was passionately dreaming ahead; and what little drama there is turns on her trying to get from her father the chance to make that dream come true.

Life with her parents in Wollaston, Mass., was not very affluent; and Ruth was no surer that her father had the mind than the money to back her plans. Father, in fact, wanted her to teach physical culture, and Father—a man who had been to sea—wasn't an easy man to argue with. He had strong opinions, which he could express in strong language. But when Ruth's gentle, helpful mother finally pushed her forward to speak her piece, Father wasn't unsympathetic—he realized, for one thing, that she was her father's strong-willed daughter. And in the end, after the sort of obstacles that third acts are made of, he let Ruth go to New York, even giving her his precious spyglass to help pay her expenses there.

• • •

In actual substance, the whole play would easily fit into a matchbox; and stretched out to three acts it palpably thins out as well. Yet, however noticeably *Years Ago* saunters and pauses, one of its virtues lies in its never trying to swell up into anything larger than it is. It is an atmospheric play, and it rightly relies on warmth and humor and homeliness to see it through. It is, indeed, more atmospheric than actual, with old songs and period furniture and Taft-era references doing a good deal to help out. And it is Ruth's father rather than Ruth who dominates the play; which is understandable, since he dominated the household. And he characterizes the play as well: here, once more, is a sentimental comedy in which the nearest thing to anything disagreeable is a kindly old codger who barks and bellows.

But Miss Gordon has handled the formula inoffensively, and Mr. Kanin has wrapped it up in a round production. Fredric March tends to overdo the bellowing, but is otherwise effective, and in one or two quiet scenes, more than that. Florence Eldridge is very good as the mother, and Patricia Kirkland as Ruth. Richard Simon does nicely as the Harvard swain Ruth has no mind to settle down with, though the part seems a little docile even for a Harvard man. And Mr. Oenslager's reminiscent dining-room set does things up brown—or is it golden oak?

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER

New York World-Telegram

DECEMBER 4, 1946

# 'Years Ago' a Nostalgic Drama

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Years Ago" is a gentle meandering little chronicle about modest home life in a Boston suburb in 1912. Since the ambitious young daughter turned out to be Ruth Gordon, the actress, who wrote the play, it is fun to see how she started. If she had not, the play would have very little impetus.

It is atmospheric rather than eventful. The characters are lovable and uncomplicated. The conflict is brief and the suspense is briefer. This tale of childish grit and parental understanding is nostalgic and warm and unexciting.

Ruth is 16, stage struck and quietly determined to get her own way. She has every girl's dream of what it will be like to be an actress, and sums it up by saying, "I'll be rich if I have to, but I want to be extravagant."

**Understands Daughter's Ambition.**

Her father, Clinton, had no education and went to sea as a boy. He hates the meager salary they must live on and is determined that Ruth shall complete school. His own misreckoned life makes him understand his daughter's fierce ambition.

Annie, Ruth's mother, is a simple, considerate soul. She has no depth beyond what it requires to dither about keeping the house running a little over her budget. Her main object is to comfort Clinton, understand Ruth and keep them in domestic peace.

Through a fan letter Ruth gets a hearing with the manager of a stock company. Papa has arranged for her to become a teacher of physical education. When he learns about her opportunity, it is not her choice of profession, but quitting school, that upsets him.

**Forbids the Appointment.**

He forbids her to keep the appointment, and when she does anyway, surprises them by being furious when the manager rejects her. He realizes that this is the real thing with Ruth, and decides that, once she completes her school year, she must do it the right way by going to New York.

Once more things look black when Papa gets into an argument with his boss the day Ruth is to leave. Reassured of her enthusiasm when she begs to go with only two dollars, he packs her off with his last beloved memento of the seafaring days.

The period comes quickly alive through clothes and slang and magazines, and talk of the new telephone and of Hazel Dawn and "The Pink Lady." Pinned down thus as the story is, it is surprising how timelessly reminiscent so much of the family relationship is.

**March Gives Fine Performance.**

Fredric March gives an unassailable performance as the cranky, devoted father. He is a tragic figure but a man of stature in his circumscribed world.

His first bout with the new telephone is delightful and his relation of his own bitter youth is moving.

Florence Eldridge is splendid as the shallow, bustling Mama. She is conventional but tries bravely to keep up with her family as she begs her daughter to please consider being normal.

Her walking up the stairs is telling characterization and she has some charming moments like the one in which she has to use a doily for a handkerchief.

Young Patricia Kirkland comes into her own as Ruth. Lined up with a pair of knowing veterans like the Marches, she not only holds her own without a quaver, but usually dominates the stage, as the part must.

Slight and no obvious beauty she gives her role earnest charm and youthful fire. When the time comes for her to face reality about dreams she reveals such downright eagerness that you feel, a few years later, she would surely become manager of the Music Hall shortly after reaching New York.

Bethel Leslie and Jennifer Bunker are charming milder girl friends, and Richard Simon is a confused, useless suitor. Seth Arnold is a very New England odd-job man and Judith Cargill and Frederic Persson are the threat to Ruth's footlights.

Miss Gordon spends one act setting the stage for a second that is amusing, eventful and moving in turn. The third act is a bustling variation on the second.

It is a thin situation, of no huge moment, except that with Miss Kirkland's playing of the autobiographical role, you feel that the kid is going to get somewhere, which, as you know, she did.

## New York Post

DECEMBER 4, 1946

### Pleasant Memories of Past In Ruth Gordon's New Play

By Richard Watts Jr.

Out of fond memories of her stagestruck days, Ruth Gordon has written an affectionate and frankly sentimental autobiographical play called "Years Ago," and Garson Kanin has staged it understandingly. It is a warm and tender little comedy, gentle, sunny and gracious, and it is filled with a winning sort of simplicity and a rueful sense of the remembrance of the days of lost innocence. But it is also slight, slender and uneventful, and, in the end, there is a mild feeling of vague disappointment, for all its pleasant virtues.

Of "Years Ago," it may be said applaudingly that it does no beating about any bushes in its autobiographical aspects. Here there is no pretense that characters and events are imaginary. The heroine is Miss Gordon, herself, and that is what she is called. The father and mother are her father and mother, and when she goes off to Boston to see a theatrical manager about a job, it is a real manager, the late John Craig. It makes for at least a pleasant suggestion of candor.

The part of her career that Miss Gordon chooses to describe begins when she was sixteen—she amiably tells us that it was during the Taft administration—and her father was determined that she should become a teacher of physical education. She, however, dreamed of Hazel Dawn and sang the wonderful songs of "The Pink Lady" and thought of the wonders of a Broadway career. It ends with her going off to New York to live at the Three Arts Club and begin making the rounds of the producers' offices, confident that she will get a job the first week.

**Dreams of Stage**

The most charming part of "Years Ago" deals with the girl's dreams of the theatre, when she confides in her friends her hopes and ambitions, tells them of the glories of the stage and sings "By the Banks of the Saskatchewan" to them. For anyone with the proper devotion to the drama, these tender little episodes are bound to be inescapably evocative and beguiling. There is charm, too, in the girl's gracious dismissal of her dashing young Harvard admirer as she plans to give up all for her art.

These scenes are winning, not only because Miss Gordon has written them from an understanding heart, but because they are so beautifully played by young Patricia Kirkland, who brings such eager freshness and bursting happiness to her work. Miss Kirkland's is a thoroughly delightful performance that is of immense help to the play. Then, too, there is a charming portrayal of her best friend by the lovely Bethel Leslie, while Richard Simon, who was once the youngest of the Day family, is good as the neglected Harvard suitor.

The part of the play devoted to the father and mother is somehow less successful, even though such skillful actors as Fredric March and Florence Eldridge have these important roles. No doubt some of the blame must be charged to the classic success of "Life With Father." The senior Days have left such an imprint on the national imagination that whenever a family group in a period American comedy appears, the father gruff and bellowing and kindly at heart, the mother meek but all-conquering, we tend to see them as carbon copies of the Days.

**The Father**

Miss Gordon has by no means written a carbon copy, particularly in the case of the father, for his adventures as a seafaring man, his unhappy youth and his shortcomings as a provider give him a quality of his own. Nevertheless, his grumblings, his rages and his quick, embarrassed kindnesses, even his lack of regard for formal religion, make him too reminiscent for complete comfort.

Mr. March is an effective actor and he makes the father a redoubtable old fellow and a man of character, but there are occasions when his rages seem too loud and studied for entire credibility. Miss Eldridge has a perhaps simpler role as the mother and she plays it sympathetically. The other players, too, are well chosen.

"Years Ago" is so slender a comedy that it has to be stretched pretty thin to achieve a third act at all, and there are other moments when it seems to be marking time. Nevertheless, its warmth and tenderness can be very touching.

## DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 4, 1946

# 'Years Ago' Winsome Play With Pat Kirkland and the Marches

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Ruth Gordon's "Years Ago" is a little treasure of a play, and in it at the Mansfield Theatre Fredric March, Patricia Kirkland and Florence Eldridge are giving performances that made me want to go right up on the stage last evening, give them a hug and say, "Thanks."

Three seasons ago Miss Gordon, a comedienne with a wispy, enjoyable style of acting, wrote for herself a comedy, "Over 21," which was theatrically slick enough to be a success. Now, out of her own life, she has written a play about a teen-age girl who was determined years ago—in 1910, to be exact—to become an actress. It is much better than being theatrically slick, for it is a human comedy, and a human comedy is likely to be as close to tears as it is to laughter.

It is funny now, this memory of how Ruth Gordon Jones, 16, daughter of the shipping room foreman of the Mellen's Food Company at Woolaston, Mass., was bound to become an actress. But it could not have been funny then to Ruth or to the parents who sweated out this great passion with her, for too often it was on the verge of disaster.

The similarity between "Years Ago" and "Life With Father" is unavoidable, for Clinton Jones was a poor man's Clarence Day—irascible, opinionated and boss of the roost. The plot with Father Day is to convert him to religion. The plot with Father Jones is to change him from wanting his daughter to become a physical training instructor to siding with her in her ambitions toward the stage—ambitions born, by the way, when the young lady saw Hazel Dawn in "The Pink Lady."

**Bringing Down Father.**

Bringing Father Jones around takes three acts, for he hates so many things. He hates cats, and hates them worse when they lie on the hot air register and bring on his old "malaria." He hates telephones. He hates the memory of the relatives who brought him to the age of 8, at which time he ran away to sea. He cusses. As his wife, Annie, explains, he has said "damn" ever since he was a sailor. And he hates living on $37.50 a week, plus a possible $100 annual bonus.

Father does come around, of course, for Ruth Gordon is now here to prove it—but before he does a high school girl has had a lot of tribulations which are comic on the surface and touching beneath. I suspect that some theatrical slickness has been necessary to make events come out even, but Garson Kanin has directed the play so skillfully that Ruth and her parents and friends—including a spurned suitor from Harvard—remain real and likable people.

Miss Kirland, a teen-ager herself, is giving her best performance as Ruth, evoking all the intensity and sweetness of a nice and reasonably gr[illegible]y lass. As the father, Mr. Ma[illegible]is splendid in the great rages of an old seafaring man and in the tenderness underlying his thick, hard crust. As Mrs. Jones, Miss Eldridge remains in a constant flutter as she is torn between mother love and wifely obedience.

There are some nice minor performances by Bethel Leslie, Jennifer Bunker and others, and especially by Richard Simon as the Harvard lad. Donald Oenslager has designed a properly hideous house.

I am glad Miss Gordon stuck by her guns and went on the stage—and am equally happy that she remembered things and made them into a play.

# "Christopher Blake"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

DECEMBER 2, 1946

By HOWARD BARNES

*Sometimes Compelling*

MOSS HART has dramatized a two-fold theme with more zeal than clarity in his new play, "Christopher Blake." He has considered the question of divorce with stern and eloquent detachment. Within that postulate, he has probed into the heart and mind of a small boy who finds himself in the middle of an ill-fated human relationship. Being a gifted showman, the author has employed a variety of theatrical devices to contrast scenes of mordant realism with the youngster's day-dreaming fantasies. The result at the Music Box is a show which mixes moments of illuminating dramatic insight and passages which come close to being embarrassing. The over-all effect is striking and somewhat confusing.

Certainly "Christopher Blake" is a drama which amply warrant that carelessly applied adjective provocative. With young Richard Tyler giving a superlative performance of the title role, the eight scenes of the work shuttle back and forth between a judge's chambers and courtroom and "the private world of Christopher Blake" with fascinating illusion and cumulative excitement. If the interludes of fancy, such as that in which the twelve-year-old imagines himself spurning his estranged parents in the poorhouse, are more slick than significant, they do not vitiate the power and sincerity of the resolution. There is a deal of teetering in the play's hopscotch but it lands on both feet.

The most serious charge against "Christopher Blake" is not that it depends on an interweaving of reality and dreams, but that it hammers away at the device. The first scene, which finds the tyke who does not want his home broken up martyrizing himself in an attempt to reconcile his parents, is too sudden for satisfactory effect. The boy's musings about what he might do to avert a divorce were he a great actor are brilliantly projected, but the incidents of a play within a play are too pat, even for a kid who had seen too many movies. Hart might have sacrificed much of the artful stagecraft which reveals the subconscious torment of his Christopher, without lessening his urgent climax, in which the parents come clean and a small boy comes of age.

The passages in which the author considers the hidden causes of a broken marriage find him writing with superb restraint and eloquence. Martha Sleeper and Shepperd Strudwick, playing the roles of Christopher's mother and father, give tremendous force to them. Tyler, while he is given a chance for more bravura gestures in the projected day dreams, is splendidly assured and sympathetic when the chips are down dramatically. Meanwhile there is staunch performing by Frank M. Thomas, Francis de Sales, Kay Loring and a long list of supporting players to make "Christopher Blake" a kaleidoscopic and sometimes compelling entertainment. Harry Horner's production effects are startling and Hart's direction is exemplary. There is so much quality in the Music Box offering that it is a pity it is not more of a piece.


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REVIEWS

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January 1, 1947—

December 31, 1947


**'CHRISTOPHER BLAKE'**

Play by Moss Hart; production designed by Harry Horner; lighting by Mr. Horner and Lee Kurz; costumes supervised by Blanche Stroock; staged by Moss Hart; presented by Gregory M. Hitzik and Bernard Hart, at the Music Box Saturday evening, November 30, 1946. The cast:

| | |
|---|---|
| A Soldier | Jon Gilbert |
| A Master | Kirk Fraser |
| A Radio Man | Hugh Williamson |
| A Photographer | Jack Garbutt |
| Another Photographer | Charles S. Dobie |
| A Radio Announcer | Kermit Kegley |
| A Newsreel Man | Frederic de Wilde |
| Another Newsreel Man | Allen Shaw |
| A Military Aid | Cheri Judd |
| A Genera | Frank M. Thomas |
| An Admiral | Tom Morrison |
| Another General | Jack Tate |
| The President | Irving Fisher |
| Christopher Blake | Richard Tyler |
| Mr. Blake | Shepperd Strudwick |
| Mrs. Blake | Martha Sleeper |
| Mr. Korfak | Francis de Sales |
| Mr. Caldwell | Weston White |
| Judge Adamson | Robert Harrison |
| A Courtroom Attendant | Raymond Van Sickle |
| The Dreamer | Tom Morrison |
| The Stage Manager | Cheri Judd |
| Bertha | Hugh Williamson |
| Miss Molly | Peggy Van Vleet |
| An Actress | Phyllis Tyler |
| Johnny | Mack Twomey |
| Ray | Dickie Lewis |
| The Headmaster | Ronald Alexander |
| The Janitor | Maximilian Schmitz |
| A Beggar | Edward Pierce |
| An Angry Man | Allen Shaw |
| A Policeman | Kermit Kegley |
| Miss Macintyre | Kay Loring |
| The Superintendent | Frank M. Thomas |
| The Mother | Susan Sanderson |
| The Father | Hugh Williamson |
| The Bailiff | Ronald Alexander |
| Photographers | Guy Tano, Bill Hoe |
| Three Boys | Charles Nevil, Dickie Lewis, Mack Twomey |
| Another Bailiff | Allen Shaw |
| A Judge | Frank M. Thomas |

SYNOPSIS: The action of the play takes place in Judge Adamson's chambers and courtroom, and in the private world of Christopher Blake. ACT I. Scene 1. The White House. Scene 2. The Chambers. Scene 3. The Stage of a Theatre. Scene 4. The Chambers. Scene 5. A Poorhouse. Scene 6. The Chambers. ACT II. Scene 1. Christopher's Courtroom. Scene 2. The Courtroom.

DAILY NEWS

DECEMBER 2, 1946

# 'Christopher Blake' Suffers From The Curse of an Aching Hart

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "Christopher Blake" Moss Hart has put aside the lightness and dexterity which have distinguished his other plays in favor of a solemn and portentous consideration of what happens to a child when there is a divorce. There was a great deal of nose-blowing at Saturday evening's premiere at the Music Box, so I judge that many of the attendants found the drama quite touching; but I thought it a soap opera of no particular quality aside from the novelty of its presentation.

Mr. Hart's dramatic device is again the dream. A boy about 14, Christopher Blake, lets his fancy wander as he sits in the anteroom of a court while his parents and a judge try to figure out who shall be his custodian after a divorce is granted. In the end it is Christopher himself who must choose — and, like Shaw's Candida, he chooses the weaker of the two.

**Life vs. Daydreams.**

Before the choice is put up to Christopher, however, he is in an emotional turmoil—a puzzled, hurt, resentful, pathetic and uncertain boy. One encounters him first in one of his dreams—the portico of the White House, where President Truman is about to decorate him and where, because of his parents' split-up, he melodramatically commits suicide.

In another day-dream he is a great actor, disdainfully accepting public worship. In a third he has come from South America, great and rich, to find his parents remarried and living in a poorhouse —where he scornfully leaves them. And, just before facing the real-life session in court, he imagines a courtroom of sheer horror, with fingerprinting, third-degree browbeating and the taunts of cold, cruel spectators.

In the real-life adventures of Christopher Blake, his parents explain to him their split-up, tell him that each loves him and wants him so much that he, not they, must make the choice. He learns of his father's unsentimental affair with another woman and of his mother's long unhappiness over being wed to the wrong man. In the real court the kindliness of the judge brings him to an emotional breakdown, after which, realizing that he is growing up and is a thinking individual, he makes his choice.

**Big Scenery, Small Subject.**

Mr. Hart tells all this in portentous dialogue, the over-theatricality of which—and the solemn and heavy direction of which—offset my appreciation of a very good performance by Richard Tyler and my admiration for some imaginative settings by Harry Horner. "Christopher Blake" is a big play, physically, with a large cast and many swiftly-changing scenes; but its dramatic content is slight and obvious. Mr. Hart wrote it with misty eyes and a great big lump in his throat, and this lack of emotional balance has upset his usually keen theatrical judgment.

Martha Sleeper and Sheppard Strudwick as the parents, and Robert Harrison, as the judge, have "big" moments at which they work most earnestly. But the play is mainly a tour de force for the set designer and for young Tyler in the title role. The boy handles a large assignment with complete sureness.

At the premiere a backstage accident occurred which called for, and got, cool thinking on the part of the audience as well as of two of the actors. Tyler and Miss Sleeper were onstage alone when, somewhere out of view, three cables snapped and a piece of scenery was heard to crash. Miss Sleeper, who was speaking, did not falter for an instant; she went quietly on with a sentimental scene, and the boy played right up to her. The audience in turn played up to them by remaining quiet and attentive. Not until intermission did one know that no one was injured backstage, and that the scenery which fell had already served its purpose and would not again be needed during the evening.

The New York Times

DECEMBER 2, 1946

## THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

By peering into the frightened turmoil of a boy's mind, Moss Hart has written a compassionate play about the most agonizing problem of divorce. "Christopher Blake" he calls it in honor of the boy who is its rueful hero. A tremendously moving performance was given it at the Music Box Saturday evening. On the plane of realistic theatre, Mr. Hart is chronicling a divorce that raises no special problems except the custody of a 12-year child. Mr. Hart is less interested in the divorce, which is a nebulous affair, than in the suffering and bewilderment of the boy.

Especially in Richard Tyler's poignant and straightforward acting, the boy is a wholly disarming youngster who instantly wins the heart of everyone in the audience. The drama is on two planes—realistic and fantastic, after the manner of "Lady in the Dark." On the realistic plane, Christopher is shy, crushed and almost inarticulate until finally he breaks down completely like a helpless child in the court room when the judge tries to find out whether he wants to stay with his mother or father. As Mr. Hart has written the part with tenderness and respect and as Mr. Tyler plays it like a young thoroughbred. Christopher turns out to be an admirable lad who is obviously the one fine thing his parents' tarnished union has produced.

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But to penetrate further into Christopher's mental and emotional ordeal, Mr. Hart has written four scenes of fantasy that dramatize Christopher's private reactions to the monstrous crisis in which he has to choose which parent he is going to live with. One of these scenes, set in a poorhouse, is maudlin; others are kindly representations of a boy's heroic narcissism. But the shrill scene that represents Christopher's imaginative concept of what the court room will be like when he has to take the witness stand is overwhelmingly affecting and a genuine contribution to the theatre's meager knowledge of human behavior.

Dramatizing Christopher's innocent fears of the adult world, this scene shows him taunted by a heartless gang of schoolboys and court officials who scream and shriek at all the points where he imagines his defenses are weakest. Cold in the writing, brilliantly sharp in the staging, this scene provides a terrifying portrait of the hell of self-imposed mental torture.

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Although Mr. Hart has gone into infinite detail to explain why Christopher's mother and father have to be divorced, the point at issue seems trifling and dogmatic in comparison with the suffering it causes. A modest and merciful person, Mr. Hart takes all his characters at their own evaluation, which, as it happens, is considerably beyond this column's tolerance for egotists. If he is overscrupulous in his attitude toward his people, that is at least a fault in a very underpopulated direction; and perhaps it also explains the fact that Christopher's choice of parent in the final scene seems more like literary than human wisdom. But Mr. Hart has wholly succeeded in his basic theme of dramatizing the spiritual agony of a helpless boy victimized by the personal limitations of his parents; and "Christopher Blake" does credit to his maturity as a writer about people.

Never one to believe in false economy, he has come close to overwhelming a touching story by an enormous production and a cast of forty-three actors, not counting incidental "spectators and passers-by." Although half his play exists in the sphere of imagination, he is unwilling to leave much of it to the imagination of his audience. Designing such a huge production has been a big job, involving engineering as well as draftsmanship. For two objects, it has been already proved, cannot occupy the same space at the same time, although sometimes they try to. Harry Horner has provided settings that succeed well in capturing Christopher's experiences and moods. They also can be handled expeditiously by a stage crew.

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As his own director Mr. Hart has again staged a skillful performance. Young Mr. Tyler, who was once the littlest brat in "Life With Father," has a long part to play in several styles of acting. Without losing his simplicity as a young boy, he is giving a triumphant performance that will make him a host of friends. Mr. Tyler need never be an orphan long. All the acting is distinguished. In the part of Christopher's father, Shepperd Strudwick acts with honesty, force and understanding considerably above the level of his last acting on Broadway, which, not to be ambiguous about it, was excellent. Without being egregious, Mr. Strudwick has the ability to represent a high-minded attitude toward life as though he believed it. It might be added by the way, that shouting does not necessarily convey earnest conviction. If father Blake always bellows like that at mother Blake, she could win a divorce for cruelty to the eardrums.

In the less clearly defined and more difficult part of Christopher's mother, Martha Sleeper is also giving a beautifully integrated performance of love, character and grief without bitterness. Constructed out of many intangibles, the part may be difficult to lay hold of, but Miss Sleeper has managed to assimilate the various facets into the portrait of a sincere, well-balanced individual.

As the benign judge, Robert Harrison gives a decently restrained performance in a noble part which from the actor's point of view tends toward obesity. There are other quickly etched performances by other actors in a long gallery of parts. For all the members of the cast are playing their parts with the affectionate respect they deserve in an ingenious and moving drama that in its best moments purges with both pity and terror.

The Sun

DECEMBER 2, 1946

## 'Christopher Blake' Bountifully Produced; Good Writing in Unsatisfactory Play.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

**Moss Hart has turned to serious drama in writing about divorce in his new play, "Christopher Blake," presented Saturday evening at the Music Box. He has written some scenes, particularly his final ones, of heartbreaking poignance, but a great deal of the play is overdone to the point of pretentiousness.**

"Christopher Blake," offered with revolving stages and mechanical devices in great variety, has been given an unsparing and bountiful production by Joseph M. Hyman and Bernard Hart. Fine performances have been contributed by the three leading players. And Moss Hart has outdone himself in his writing in portions of his drama.

The fact remains, however, that "Christopher Blake" is straining, awkward and frequently laborious. The elaborate effects used by the author in the telling of his story are not always to his advantage, or to the play's. The drama is at its best in its simpler moments.

In writing of the impact of a divorce upon a 12-year-old boy Moss Hart uses a combination of realism and fantasy. His realistic portions are considerably more effective than his dream sequences. The scene near the final curtain in which the boy is called upon to make his great decision—a decision in which he chooses the custody of his father and tells why he feels his parents should be granted a divorce—is moving drama, beautifully played and written. This affecting portion of "Christopher Blake" represents, to my notion, the best work that the talented Moss Hart has done for the New York theater since he came into it as a challenging figure not so many seasons ago.

But there are big chunks of this new play sprawled out upon the stage erected by Irving Berlin and the late Sam H. Harris that don't play so well. The spectacular opening scene, for instance. This is one, out of the imagination of young Chris, which shows him receiving acclaim from the President of the United States in a White House ceremony for a plan for world peace and then dying a suicide in his effort to bring his battling parents together, and it does little for the play. And the poorhouse sequence, with the boy spurning his impoverished mother and father, comes off as blundering drama. I wish all of the play were of the quality of its final moments.

Martha Sleeper gives the performance of her career as the wife for whom the marriage hasn't been right from the very beginning. She is vivid and believable. Shepperd Strudwick, playing the husband who took to a mistress but who is still trying to hold the marriage together, gets somewhat too violent at times but is tremendously moving in his quieter moments.

Richard Tyler, an engaging young actor of exceptional skill, plays the hurt and bewildered boy forced to choose between his parents. He is amazingly successful in his projection of a many-sided part. Robert Harrison is human and mellow as an understanding judge. Irving Fisher presents a somewhat startling resemblance to President Truman appearing in the opening scene. Harry Horner's scenery is first-rate.

"Christopher Blake," for all of Moss Hart's incisive writing in portions of his drama, is actually more forceful as a production than it is as a play. It has enormous tenseness at times, but it is too diffuse and too spasmodic to be put down as satisfactory theater.

I wish Moss Hart had forgotten his "Lady in the Dark" technic, had forgone his revolving stages and had devoted himself to the telling of his story with less scenery, less characters, less fantasy. He would have had a neater, tighter, more compelling drama.

Journal-American

DECEMBER 2, 1946

## Hart Drama At Music Box

By ROBERT GARLAND

At the Music Box, Moss Hart's new play is a sort of Broadway grab-bag overfilled with ideas and inventions. Many of the ideas are significant, most of them are timely. Many of the inventions are fresh, most of them are striking.

But what, to me, falsifies the former and disatpates the latter is the unstable, not to say hysterical, makeup of the central character, of the young Christopher Blake who gives the piece its name and about whose instability, not to say hysterik, the entire work revolves.

As Mr. Hart has fashioned him, Chris is a likely-looking lad of 14 with a parent fixation that is anything but normal. While, night before last in 45th st., his parents were getting a divorce, he should have been talking heart-to-heart with some paternal psychiatrist.

For what, in Moss Hart's specious and sprawling melodrama, the Blake boy's parents do to him is nothing when compared to what the Blake boy does to himself. A dream boy, this Blake boy, whose dreams are pathologic.

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At the confused start of Moss Hart's continuously confusing play, this supposedly run-of-the-boarding-school young fellow whips himself up into an imaginary lather ending in an imaginary suicide, with the President and the entire population of the United States looking on or listening in with tearful admiration.

This self-inflicted bumping off is followed by a lesson-to-mama interlude up on the stage of an imaginary theatre and a poor-house sequence in which both parents are punished properly.

Then, still in what programs at the Music Box refer to as "the private world of Christopher Blake," comes an hallucinatory courtroom number in which our flagellant young hero out-flagellates himself to the jeers, hoots, boos, taunts, gibes and other imaginary indignities he conjures up in broad daylight for his own juvenile aggrandizement.

Our self-centered Chris is a whole lot more sorry for himself than he is sorry for his papa and his mamma. And they've got him as their extra added worry.

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I've been harping on Christopher Blake, Moss Hart's delirious dream boy, because in him is found the fatal and fundamental fault in what might otherwise be a significant, timely, fresh and striking play, replete with ideas and inventions. At the Music Box, a boy called Richard Tyler tries right manfully to turn poor Chris into the stalwart young American he sets out to be.

And this he does right manfully until, in every other interlude, Mr. Hart orders him into alarming mental instability.

What remains, in the realistic breathing spells, is a three-dimensional soap opera in which Mr. and Mrs. Blake are applying for a mutual separation because they love each other too much to remain together. And Christopher, a Candida in his first long trousers, must decide between them.

He, too, sticks by the weaker. The weaker is papa, who says "different than," but is otherwise a literate guy in Shepperd Strudwick's hands. As mama Martha Sleeper is as good as she can be.

A showy showpiece which might have been a play of plays, Moss Hart's "Christopher Blake." A worthy vehicle for young Richard Tyler's great actorial talents. But no great American play.

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PM

DECEMBER 2, 1946

Kronenberger

## *The Effect of Divorce On a 12-Year-Old Boy*

*PM Reviews*

I have great respect for what Moss Hart wanted to do in *Christopher Blake*. It's a matter of not only the play but the playwright. For some years now Mr. Hart has been turning away from the Broadway comedies that made him a fortune toward something more individual and adventurous. And now, with *Christopher Blake*, he has, in a way, crossed the Rubicon. He has written a very serious play, and he has written it without compromise.

The play itself is not a success. It's hardly the kind of play that an expert dramatist would find it easy to succeed at; and Mr. Hart is really a man of the theater and not a dramatist at all. He has a fine eye for surface effect, both large and small; but he cannot synthesize and he cannot penetrate. And the theme he has chosen is perhaps as tough as it is tempting—the predicament of a 12-year-old boy whose parents are being divorced and who must choose which of them he will live with. The predicament is an acute one, and might seem made-to-order for the stage. But its very acuteness, its very sense of arrived-at crisis, argues for something brief, compact and intense. Of course, there is another way, the way Mr. Hart has taken—of filling in the situation with all the facts that led up to it, with the people who complicate it, with the issues that encumber it, and with the inner life of the boy as he gropes his way through it.

That way is pretty hazardous. To begin with, most of the intensity may easily be lost. For another thing, we can no longer settle for the straight drama of a situation; we ask for people, real, full-sized and probably complex; for much of what we get from a good psychological problem novel; and above all, we have somehow to get inside the boy, to know both his present emotions and his permanent make-up.

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Mr. Hart faces up to his task, but it floors him. He gives us the facts and the courtroom atmosphere, he sets wife against husband, he shows each in relation to the child. He shows Chris in the midst of all this, quiet, bewildered, sometimes a little benumbed, and largely (as children usually are in such circumstances) impenetrable. But to us he opens Chris's mind, dramatizing the fantasies that race through it—Chris killing himself (just after President Truman has acclaimed him as a great man) and thereby reuniting his parents; Chris, a world-famous actor, talking his mother out of a divorce by enacting a melodrama about his plight; Chris as a South American magnifico dropping in on his parents at the poorhouse to denounce them; Chris, in a word, as a kind of Walter Mitty, Jr. And back again in real life, Mr. Hart sees things through to the end: shows Chris (in an effective moment of theater) suddenly breaking down; has him choose between his parents; and (in a bad final moment) reveal that everything's going to be all right.

The job floors Mr. Hart because he lacks the proper imagination, insight and writing skill. What he has set forth is plausible enough—but it is plausible just because it is so unparticularized, because it is equally truth or cliche—*any* divorce, *any* parents, *any* child. Chris' fantasies are the classic, the obvious ones, part anxiety, part escape; they do not characterize Chris, and nothing else characterizes him either. Nor are his parents characterized any better; they are at most mildly contrasted.

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Though all this destroys *Christopher Blake* as serious drama, it might yet leave it standing as theater. But Mr. Hart's usual showmanship is often missing too. Some of the fantasy scenes have a certain gaudy hubbub and bustle, and there are occasional sharp moments in the courtroom. But Mr. Hart's dialogue is much of it curiously flat; and *Christopher Blake* pretty much crumbles as theater under the load of sober detail and documentation with which it is burdened. There is something a little exhausting about it all.

The production is much enhanced by 14-year-old Richard Tyler's rather remarkable performance as Chris; its versatility in the fantasy scenes is conspicuous, but its sensibility in the real-life scenes is more rewarding. Mr. Tyler has to go it pretty much alone, however. As the mother, Martha Sleeper is neither very good nor very bad; but Shepperd Strudwick is stilted and shouty as the father, and Robert Harrison pretty dull and stiff as the Judge.

—Louis Kronenberger